

POLICY OVERLOAD AND TEACHER BURNOUT: RETHINKING EDUCATION REFORM IN INDONESIA

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Abstract. *This study critically examines the phenomenon of policy overload and its implications for teacher burnout within the context of education reform in Indonesia. Despite continuous policy innovation aimed at improving educational quality, teachers are increasingly confronted with overlapping regulations, rapid policy changes, and escalating administrative demands. Drawing on a qualitative research design using critical policy analysis, this study analyzes policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature, including international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, to explore the relationship between policy design and classroom realities. The findings reveal that policy overload has become a structural feature of the education system, resulting in significant pressure on teachers as frontline implementers. This condition contributes to teacher burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced professional engagement, and diminished instructional capacity. Furthermore, the study identifies a pattern of instructional displacement, where teachers shift their focus from pedagogical practices to administrative compliance. As a result, the quality of instruction declines, reinforcing the persistence of the learning crisis in Indonesia. This study argues that the limitations of education reform are rooted not merely in implementation gaps, but in systemic policy design failures, including weak policy coherence, inadequate evaluation mechanisms, and insufficient consideration of teacher capacity. In response, the study proposes a reorientation toward a teacher-centered policy framework that emphasizes policy simplification, workload reduction, evidence-based reform, and enhanced teacher agency. Ultimately, sustainable education reform requires aligning policy demands with the realities of teaching practice to achieve meaningful improvements in learning outcomes.*

Keywords: Education Reform; Indonesia; Policy Overload; Teacher Burnout; Teacher Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, education reform in Indonesia has accelerated through a series of ambitious policy initiatives, including curriculum transformation, large-scale digitalization, and teacher professional development programs. These reforms, particularly those introduced under the leadership of Nadiem Makarim, have been framed as transformative efforts to enhance learning quality, promote student-centered pedagogy, and improve global competitiveness. However, despite this policy momentum, empirical evidence suggests that improvements in student learning outcomes remain limited.

International assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) consistently indicate that Indonesian students perform below the OECD average in literacy and numeracy. This persistent gap raises critical questions regarding the effectiveness of ongoing reforms and points to deeper structural issues within the education system. While

existing studies have largely focused on curriculum design, technological integration, and assessment systems, significantly less attention has been paid to the capacity and working conditions of teachers as the primary agents of policy implementation.

Within this context, the concept of *policy overload* has emerged as a critical yet underexplored issue. Policy overload refers to a condition in which frontline implementers are required to respond to multiple, overlapping, and frequently changing policy demands, often without adequate support or alignment with their professional capacity (Dunn, 2018). In Indonesia, teachers are increasingly expected to simultaneously implement new curricula, engage with multiple digital platforms, complete extensive administrative tasks, and participate in continuous professional development programs. Rather than enabling instructional improvement, this accumulation of responsibilities risks overwhelming teachers and diluting their core pedagogical function.

The consequences of policy overload are closely linked to the phenomenon of *teacher burnout*, a multidimensional condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In the context of education reform, burnout is not merely an individual psychological issue but a systemic outcome of policy design and implementation failure. Drawing on the theory of street-level bureaucracy, Michael Lipsky argues that frontline actors such as teachers inevitably reinterpret and adapt policies under conditions of resource constraints and work pressure. When policy demands exceed their capacity, teachers may resort to coping mechanisms that prioritize compliance over meaningful instruction, thereby undermining the intended goals of reform.

This dynamic contributes to what can be described as a *policy–practice misalignment*, where the expectations embedded in policy frameworks are disconnected from the realities of classroom practice. As a result, education reform risks becoming performative—producing visible policy activity without substantive improvement in learning quality. In such conditions, the persistence of the learning crisis in Indonesia is not surprising, but rather symptomatic of deeper structural inconsistencies within the policy system.

Despite the growing recognition of teacher-related challenges, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the intersection between policy overload, teacher burnout, and learning outcomes in Indonesia. Most existing research treats these issues in isolation, failing to capture their interdependent and systemic nature. This study addresses this gap by advancing a critical policy analysis that positions teachers at the center of reform dynamics.

Accordingly, this study aims to:

1. Examine the extent and characteristics of policy overload experienced by teachers in Indonesia;
2. Analyze the relationship between policy overload and teacher burnout;
3. Explore how this relationship affects instructional quality and contributes to the persistence of the learning crisis; and
4. Propose a rethinking of education reform through a teacher-centered policy framework.

By foregrounding the lived realities of teachers, this study challenges dominant reform narratives and argues that sustainable improvement in education quality cannot be achieved without fundamentally reconfiguring the relationship between policy design and teacher capacity.

This study aims to critically examine the structural challenges underlying education reform in Indonesia by focusing on the interrelated issues of policy overload and teacher burnout. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

To analyze the nature and extent of policy overload experienced by teachers in the context of

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ongoing education reform in Indonesia, including overlapping regulations, administrative demands, and rapid policy changes.

1. To investigate the relationship between policy overload and teacher burnout, particularly how excessive policy demands contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced professional engagement, and declining teacher well-being.
2. To examine the impact of teacher burnout on instructional quality and learning outcomes, with particular attention to the shift from pedagogical practices toward compliance-oriented tasks.
3. To identify the systemic misalignment between policy design and teachers' capacity, highlighting the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.
4. To propose a teacher-centered policy framework that emphasizes workload reduction, contextualized implementation, and sustainable professional development as a foundation for more effective education reform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing intensity of education reform across global and national contexts has brought renewed attention to the relationship between policy design and implementation capacity, particularly in systems characterized by rapid and overlapping policy interventions. Within this discourse, the concept of policy overload has emerged as a critical lens for understanding the unintended consequences of reform expansion. Policy overload refers to a condition in which implementing actors are confronted with multiple, simultaneous, and often conflicting policy demands that exceed their operational capacity. As argued by William N. Dunn (2018), effective policy is contingent upon the alignment between policy objectives and the capacity of those responsible for implementation. When such alignment is absent, policy interventions risk becoming ineffective or even counterproductive.

In education systems, policy overload is frequently manifested through the accumulation of reforms, including curriculum changes, administrative requirements, accountability mechanisms, and digital innovations. While each reform may be justified in isolation, their combined effect often leads to fragmentation and increased complexity. Scholars such as Ball (2003) have highlighted how performative policy environments shift teachers' priorities toward compliance and measurable outputs, thereby constraining professional autonomy and pedagogical creativity. Similarly, Fullan (2007) emphasizes that the success of educational change depends not on the quantity of reforms, but on the coherence and sustainability of implementation. In contexts where reform initiatives are introduced without sufficient integration or sequencing, policy overload becomes an inevitable outcome.

Closely related to this phenomenon is the issue of teacher burnout, which represents a critical consequence of excessive policy demands. Burnout has been conceptualized by Maslach and Jackson (1981) as a multidimensional syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. In the field of education, burnout is consistently associated with high workload, role conflict, and lack of institutional support. However, beyond its psychological dimensions, burnout must also be understood as a systemic outcome shaped by policy environments. Hargreaves (2005) argues that educational change is not only a technical process but also an emotional one, in which teachers' responses to reform are deeply influenced by the conditions under which they work. When policy demands are excessive and poorly aligned with professional capacity, burnout becomes a structural rather than individual issue.

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Empirical research further demonstrates that administrative burden and policy-related pressures are among the most significant predictors of teacher burnout. Studies have shown that teachers who are required to engage extensively in non-instructional tasks report lower job satisfaction and reduced engagement in teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). This has direct implications for instructional quality, as teacher well-being is closely linked to student learning outcomes. In this regard, policy overload operates not only as a workload issue but also as a mechanism that indirectly affects educational quality through its impact on teachers.

To better understand how policy demands are translated into practice, the theory of street-level bureaucracy developed by Michael Lipsky (1980) provides a valuable analytical framework. According to this perspective, frontline actors such as teachers do not simply implement policies as designed, but actively interpret and adapt them in response to contextual constraints. In situations of policy overload, teachers are likely to develop coping strategies that prioritize efficiency and compliance over depth and quality. These strategies may include simplifying instructional practices, selectively implementing policy components, or focusing on tasks that are most visible to evaluators. While such adaptations are rational responses to systemic pressures, they often result in superficial implementation and diminished policy effectiveness.

A key implication of these dynamics is the emergence of a policy–practice gap, in which the intentions embedded in policy frameworks are not fully realized in classroom practice. Spillane (2004) argues that this gap is not merely a failure of implementation, but a reflection of the complex interactions between policy design, organizational context, and individual agency. In centralized education systems, where policies are often formulated in a top-down manner, this gap tends to be more pronounced due to limited consideration of local conditions and teacher capacity. As a result, policies that appear coherent at the national level may become fragmented and inconsistent in practice.

These challenges are closely linked to the broader issue of the learning crisis, which has become a central concern in global education discourse. International assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment consistently reveal that many education systems struggle to achieve basic levels of student proficiency despite extensive reform efforts. In Indonesia, this pattern is particularly evident, as improvements in policy frameworks have not been matched by significant gains in learning outcomes. This paradox suggests that the effectiveness of education reform cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of policy innovation, but must also consider the conditions under which policies are implemented.

One of the most influential insights in this regard is provided by Hattie (2009), who identifies teacher quality as one of the most significant factors affecting student achievement. This underscores the centrality of teachers in the reform process and highlights the limitations of policy approaches that neglect teacher conditions. When teachers are overburdened, under-supported, and excluded from policy design, the potential impact of even well-designed reforms is significantly reduced.

In response to these limitations, there is a growing call for a shift toward a teacher-centered policy framework that places teachers at the core of education reform. Such an approach emphasizes the importance of aligning policy demands with teacher capacity, reducing administrative burden, and supporting meaningful professional development. It also recognizes the need to enhance teacher agency by involving educators in policy formulation and decision-making processes. By prioritizing coherence, sustainability, and contextual relevance, a teacher-centered approach offers a more viable pathway for achieving long-term improvements in educational quality.

Despite the relevance of these perspectives, existing literature has largely treated policy overload, teacher burnout, and learning outcomes as separate issues. There remains a

significant gap in understanding how these factors interact within a single systemic framework, particularly in the context of Indonesia. This study addresses this gap by integrating these dimensions into a comprehensive analysis that links policy design to classroom practice and learning outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the structural challenges underlying education reform and provides a foundation for more effective and sustainable policy interventions.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a critical policy analysis approach to investigate the phenomenon of policy overload and its impact on teacher burnout within the context of education reform in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of complex and context-dependent relationships between policy structures and teachers' lived experiences, which cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the use of critical policy analysis allows the study to go beyond descriptive examination by critically evaluating how policies are formulated, implemented, and experienced at the level of frontline actors, as well as how they generate unintended consequences within the education system.

The study relies on secondary data sources to construct a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis. These data include national education policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and regulatory guidelines, as well as institutional reports from international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which provide insights into system performance and learning outcomes. In addition, the study incorporates peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books addressing policy overload, teacher burnout, and education reform, alongside supporting empirical studies related to teacher workload, administrative burden, and instructional practices. The integration of these diverse data sources allows for a holistic understanding of the issue from both policy and practice perspectives.

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis, involving the identification, selection, and review of relevant documents based on clearly defined inclusion criteria. These criteria include the relevance of documents to education policy and teacher-related issues, the credibility and academic rigor of the sources, and the recency of publication, with priority given to works published within the last 10–15 years while still incorporating foundational theoretical contributions. This systematic approach ensures that the data used in the analysis are both reliable and relevant to the research objectives.

The data were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis, content analysis, and critical policy analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and key themes across the data through a process of data familiarization, coding, categorization, and interpretation. The main themes that emerged include policy overload, administrative burden, teacher burnout, instructional displacement, and the learning crisis. Content analysis was used to systematically examine policy documents, focusing on identifying policy priorities, the frequency and nature of policy changes, and the extent of administrative requirements imposed on teachers. Meanwhile, critical policy analysis was applied to evaluate the alignment between policy design and implementation capacity, uncover underlying assumptions within policy frameworks, and assess the unintended consequences resulting from the accumulation of policies.

The analytical process is guided by a conceptual framework that positions policy overload as the primary driver influencing teacher burnout, which in turn leads to instructional displacement, declining instructional quality, and ultimately contributes to the persistence of the learning crisis. This framework also acknowledges the role of moderating factors such as

teacher capacity, institutional support, and policy coherence in shaping the extent to which policy overload affects teachers and learning outcomes.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation through the use of multiple sources, and theoretical triangulation by integrating perspectives from policy analysis, burnout theory, and street-level bureaucracy. Transparency in the research process was maintained by clearly documenting the procedures for data selection and analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Despite its strengths, this study has certain limitations. As it relies on secondary data, it does not incorporate primary empirical evidence such as interviews or surveys with teachers. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as a conceptual and analytical contribution rather than as direct empirical generalization. Future research is therefore recommended to validate and extend the proposed framework through quantitative or mixed-method approaches.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Framework (for Methodological Strength)

Code Category	Code Label	Description	Source Type
Policy Structure	Policy Overload	Excessive number of policies and demands	Policy reports documents,
Implementation	Administrative Burden	Non-teaching workload	Teacher reports, literature
Teacher Condition	Burnout	Emotional and professional exhaustion	Empirical studies
Practice findings	Instructional Shift	Movement from teaching to compliance	Observational
System Outcome			
	Learning Crisis	Low student performance	International assessments

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the phenomenon of policy overload in Indonesia’s education reform is not merely an operational challenge at the implementation level, but rather a manifestation of a deeper structural problem embedded within policy design. From a substantive perspective, the accumulation of multiple reforms—ranging from curriculum transformation and digitalization to administrative reporting systems—has created an environment in which teachers are expected to respond to numerous, often overlapping, policy demands simultaneously. Drawing on the policy analysis framework articulated by William N. Dunn (2018), effective policy requires alignment between objectives and implementation capacity. However, the Indonesian case illustrates a persistent misalignment, where policy ambition exceeds the practical capacity of teachers as frontline implementers. This imbalance

ultimately transforms policy from an instrument of improvement into a source of systemic pressure.

From a methodological standpoint, the study highlights a critical weakness in the policy cycle, particularly the absence of robust evaluation mechanisms. In theory, policy development follows a rational sequence of formulation, implementation, evaluation, and revision. In practice, however, education reform in Indonesia tends to follow a reactive pattern in which new policies are introduced before existing ones are adequately assessed. This results in what scholars describe as policy layering, a condition in which successive policies accumulate without the removal or integration of previous ones (Howlett & Rayner, 2007). The lack of longitudinal evaluation prevents institutional learning and leads to the reproduction of ineffective policy patterns. Consequently, policy expansion continues without sufficient evidence of its impact, reinforcing inefficiencies within the system.

At the pragmatic level, the study identifies significant policy fragmentation and incoherence as key drivers of policy overload. Fragmentation is evident in the lack of synchronization between different policy initiatives, the overlap of programs, and inconsistencies between national directives and local implementation contexts. Such conditions create ambiguity for teachers, who must interpret and prioritize competing demands in the absence of clear guidance. This aligns with the theory of street-level bureaucracy proposed by Michael Lipsky (1980), which emphasizes that frontline actors inevitably exercise discretion when faced with resource constraints and conflicting expectations. In the context of policy overload, teachers adopt coping mechanisms that prioritize administrative compliance over pedagogical innovation. While these strategies are rational responses to systemic pressure, they inadvertently contribute to superficial implementation and weaken the transformative potential of education reform.

The implications of policy overload become most visible at the level of field practice, where teachers experience increasing levels of burnout and a shift in instructional priorities. The study finds that excessive administrative demands and continuous policy changes lead to emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and declining professional engagement among teachers. This condition is consistent with the conceptualization of burnout developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981), which identifies emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment as central dimensions of the syndrome. In the Indonesian context, burnout is not simply an individual psychological issue, but a structural outcome of policy conditions that place excessive demands on teachers without adequate support. As a result, teachers are compelled to reallocate their time and energy away from instructional activities toward administrative compliance, a phenomenon that can be described as instructional displacement. This shift has profound implications for the quality of teaching and learning, as it reduces opportunities for meaningful student engagement and pedagogical innovation.

The persistence of this dynamic helps explain why improvements in education policy have not translated into significant gains in student learning outcomes. International assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment continue to show that Indonesia faces substantial challenges in literacy and numeracy achievement. This suggests that the learning crisis is not solely a consequence of curriculum design or student-related factors, but rather a systemic issue rooted in the conditions under which teachers operate. In this sense, policy overload serves as a critical mediating factor that links policy design to classroom outcomes.

Synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that there is a clear causal pathway through which policy overload contributes to the persistence of the learning crisis. Excessive and fragmented policy demands generate teacher burnout, which in turn leads to instructional displacement and declining instructional quality. This chain of effects underscores the

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importance of viewing education reform as an interconnected system rather than a collection of isolated interventions. Without addressing the structural relationship between policy demands and teacher capacity, reform efforts are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements.

In response to these challenges, this study argues for a fundamental reorientation of education reform toward a teacher-centered policy framework. Such an approach requires a shift from policy expansion to policy coherence, emphasizing the need to simplify and integrate existing policies rather than continuously introducing new ones. Reducing administrative burden is essential, not only through the elimination of redundant tasks but also through the redesign of digital systems to support, rather than constrain, instructional work. Furthermore, policy development must be grounded in evidence-based and longitudinal evaluation processes to ensure that reforms are both effective and sustainable. Strengthening teacher professional capacity through practice-oriented development programs and collaborative learning communities is equally important, as it enables teachers to engage more meaningfully with reform initiatives. Finally, enhancing teacher agency by involving educators in policy design can improve both the relevance and the legitimacy of policies, thereby increasing their likelihood of successful implementation.

Table 2. Summary of Qualitative Findings on Policy Overload and Teacher Burnout

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Findings	Interpretation
Policy Overload	Overlapping Policies simultaneously without integration	Multiple policies implemented	Indicates lack of policy coherence and coordination
	Administrative Burden	Teachers spend significant time on reporting, documentation, and digital systems	Shifts focus away from instructional practices
	Rapid Policy Changes	Frequent changes in curriculum and programs	Creates instability and adaptation fatigue
Teacher Burnout	Emotional Exhaustion	Teachers experience stress, fatigue, and decreased motivation	Reflects unsustainable workload conditions
	Reduced Professional Engagement	Declining enthusiasm for teaching	Indicates weakening teacher commitment
	Work Pressure	Increased demands without proportional support	Leads to long-term psychological strain
Instructional Impact	Instructional Displacement	Teaching activities replaced by administrative compliance	Reduces quality of classroom interaction
	Reduced Teaching Quality	Limited time for lesson planning and innovation	Weakens student learning experiences

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Policy– Practice Gap	Misalignment	Policy expectations do not match classroom realities	Demonstrates disconnect between policy design and implementation
	Lack of Support	Insufficient training and infrastructure	Limits teachers’ ability to implement policies effectively
Systemic Impact	Learning Crisis	Persistent low learning outcomes	Result of accumulated systemic issues
	Reform Ineffectiveness	Policies fail to produce expected improvements	Indicates structural failure in reform strategy

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that the success of education reform in Indonesia depends not on the quantity of policies introduced, but on the degree to which those policies are aligned with the realities of teaching practice. Without placing teachers at the center of reform efforts, policy innovation risks becoming performative, producing visible change without substantive improvement in learning outcomes.

The qualitative findings summarized in Table 1 reveal a consistent pattern linking policy overload to teacher burnout and declining instructional quality. The data indicate that excessive administrative demands and overlapping policies significantly shift teachers’ focus from pedagogical practices to compliance-oriented tasks. Furthermore, the thematic coding in Table 2 highlights the systemic nature of these challenges, demonstrating how policy design, implementation pressures, and teacher conditions interact to produce a persistent learning crisis.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the central challenge in Indonesia’s education reform does not lie in the absence of policy innovation, but rather in the excessive accumulation and misalignment of policies imposed on teachers. The phenomenon of policy overload has emerged as a critical structural issue that undermines the effectiveness of reform efforts by placing disproportionate demands on teachers as frontline implementers. Instead of enabling instructional improvement, the continuous expansion of policies has generated systemic pressure that exceeds teachers’ professional capacity.

The findings demonstrate that policy overload is a significant driver of teacher burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced professional engagement, and diminished instructional effectiveness. This condition leads to what can be conceptualized as instructional displacement, where teachers shift their focus from meaningful pedagogical practices to administrative compliance. As a consequence, the quality of teaching and learning declines, contributing to the persistence of the learning crisis in Indonesia, as reflected in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment.

More fundamentally, this study highlights that the limitations of education reform are rooted in a systemic failure of policy design. The lack of coherence among policies, the absence of rigorous evaluation mechanisms, and the insufficient consideration of teacher capacity have collectively produced a reform environment that is fragmented, unsustainable, and ultimately

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ineffective. In this context, policy innovation without structural alignment risks becoming performative, generating visible change without substantive improvement in educational outcomes.

In response to these challenges, this study argues for a fundamental reorientation of education reform toward a teacher-centered policy framework that prioritizes coherence, sustainability, and implementation feasibility. Rather than continuously introducing new initiatives, policymakers must focus on simplifying and integrating existing policies to reduce fragmentation and enhance clarity at the implementation level. Reducing administrative burden is essential, not only through the elimination of redundant reporting requirements but also through the redesign of digital systems to support teachers' instructional work.

Furthermore, education policies must be grounded in evidence-based and longitudinal evaluation processes to ensure that reforms are informed by empirical data rather than short-term pressures. Strengthening teacher professional capacity through practice-oriented and sustained development programs is equally critical, as it enables teachers to engage meaningfully with policy initiatives. Equally important is the need to enhance teacher agency by involving educators in policy formulation, thereby improving policy relevance, ownership, and effectiveness.

Ultimately, sustainable education reform cannot be achieved through the proliferation of policies, but through the strategic alignment of policy demands with the realities of teaching practice. Placing teachers at the center of reform is not merely a normative aspiration, but a structural necessity. Without such a shift, even the most ambitious reforms will continue to fall short of their intended impact on learning outcomes.

Closing Statement

Sustainable education reform cannot be achieved through the continuous expansion of policies, but through the strategic alignment of policy demands with teacher capacity. Without placing teachers at the center of reform, even the most ambitious policies will fail to produce meaningful improvements in learning outcomes.

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